

LOUISIANA Conservationist

September/October 2005

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Family Fun Afield Hunting Teal



Tracking Mallards

Managing the 'Gator

*Dedicated to the conservation and restoration of Louisiana's natural resources.
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Comments

Dwight Landreneau, Secretary

Seasoned hunters are preparing now, and many are ready, for the 2005-06 hunting season. Early season enthusiasts will head to the field for dove season as this issue of *Louisiana Conservationist* arrives in the mail.

We all look forward to a pleasant change in temperature, and outdoorsmen and women can't wait for what many believe is the best time of the year.

The Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will provide an opportunity this fall for anyone interested in experiencing the outdoors as a hunter. This

opportunity, called **Discover Louisiana Hunting (DLH)**, targets beginners and those who have lost touch with the sport and coincides with Thanksgiving weekend, Nov. 25-27.

Conversations I've had with various hunter groups, such as the National Whitetail Association, sparked the idea for an event of this type. It is now on the hunting calendar with the cooperation and approval of the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, thanks to the resources of several divisions within the department.

Anyone of licensing age (16 and over) can obtain a DLH permit at no cost and hunt on this weekend only. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that anyone can experience.

The main emphasis, as with all programs the department promotes, will be on safety. Participants must obtain Hunter Education certification and partner with a licensed, "host" hunter for their weekend in the woods. The education process is essential for anyone using a shotgun or rifle in the field and the "host" hunter requirement provides mentoring for novices attempting the sport for the first time.

I'm asking all experienced Louisiana hunters to get involved and make this an enjoyable, educational event for those who want to learn the proper way to hunt. New hunters on DLH weekend will need guidance on the mutual courtesies fellow hunters extend to each other while in the woods. Example scenarios are part of hunter education training, but real-life situations outside of the workbook always present themselves. That's where we need your assistance.

There was a time when parents and grandparents passed along the traditions of hunting to the eager next generation. That chain of knowledge has been interrupted in many instances for a variety of reasons. Families have lost touch with the sport over the years as rural acreage changed hands and access to property became a problem, or an assortment of extracurricular opportunities drew school-age youngsters away from the outdoors.

The resources are there for those who are interested, however. Our state's wildlife management areas provide thousands of acres for public hunting—and many are underutilized. Private landowners can certainly extend invitations to family members or acquaintances and get involved to the extent they choose.

Look for opportunities to become a host hunter on Thanksgiving weekend. If you are approached by an interested beginner, consider taking him or her along as you plan your hunt. It could be a relative, a co-worker or a neighbor. If there is someone you've promised for years you were going to "take huntin'"—now's the chance. Just remind your guest to begin planning now. There are a variety of Hunter Education Program options available, all of which are explained on the LDWF Web site (www.wlf.louisiana.gov) along with information on those species that can be hunted with a DLH permit.

It's all about introducing the outdoors to a new audience who hopefully will develop a lifetime appreciation for game and fish resources—and their habitats. LDWF needs your involvement to make it happen.



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A Tradition of Teal



Story by
Marty CANNON

Photo by John Ford

Depending on where you are in this great nation, the opening of the "bird" season is a major focal point of the calendar year.

In some states there is the opening of quail season, out West it might be grouse and elsewhere there are the famous pheasant seasons. Down in Louisiana, we have the luxury of three: dove, teal and the big duck season. All three are important to families from border to border. In my family, the opening of teal season might as well be New Year's Day.

Right around the first of September as the sweat is still pouring out of my pores, a shiver shoots through my skin at the thought of the coming teal season. The Weather Channel by then is usually showing cooler temperatures across the Canadian and American Prairie Pothole Region and my senses have picked up on the fact that the days are getting shorter. Some may see that time as the end of the fun season, but I see it as a beginning. It signals that time of year where I can return to the field with shotgun in hand, let the calls dangle around my neck and put on those old hip boots to slosh around in the mud in chase of teal.

Teal hunting is a traditional hunting sport in Louisiana. It is unique to the state, people work hard to sustain it and its future depends on what we teach our youth. While the last few seasons have been slower, duck numbers have been down and the early September teal split has been reduced, it is a reminder that we should appreciate how fragile and precious our resources are. These factors in no way detract from the joy of hunting teal.

The three main types that visit Louisiana are the blue-winged, green-winged and cinnamon teal. Blue-wings are usually the first to arrive. Louisiana boasts an early September split just for teal because of their early arrival in the Bayou State, but they can be harvested all through the 60-day big duck season that usually runs from November through January.

One of the special things about teal in Louisiana is that we are some of the few that get to hunt them. Sure, late flying teal may be taken in any state along their flyway, but blue-winged teal often begin showing up in Louisiana as early as August. That means they have bypassed the majority of North America's hunting grounds well before anyone loaded a shotgun in hopes of taking one. That makes our little tradition that much sweeter.

John Devney, the senior vice president of Delta Waterfowl in Bismarck, North Dakota, admires us for the chance to hunt the speedy little ducks.

"You guys are really lucky in that around August or when we get an early cold front, they're gone. They're lightly gunned up here, virtually untouched in their own breeding areas. We love to shoot at them, but we don't get a good crack at them like you guys do," he said.

Delta Waterfowl, one of the leaders in waterfowl research, assists aspiring scientists and conservation leaders in learning what they can about ensuring a bright future for waterfowl.

"Louisiana is by far the state that harvests the most teal," he added. "Texas probably ranks second but nowhere close to the number taken in Louisiana. There's no place in the 50 states with traditions for teal hunting like Louisiana."

For a man who dedicated his life to waterfowl and who practically lives in the heart of America's waterfowl breeding grounds, Devney's comments are truly complimentary.

"Teal have been one of those species that responded very well in the 1990s to CRP (the Conservation Reserve Program) and more water on the landscape," he continued. "Their numbers have been pretty good over the past years. Teal are like pintail in a lot of ways. They will come back home to areas that they were born in or had good success in and then follow the water. Teal look for the best areas to breed. For that reason, blue-wings might be the duck of the future. They chase water and prefer the smaller, seasonal wetlands."

Photo by Marty Cannon



Traditions require hard work to survive. The "duck of the future" may be doing well in the breeding grounds, but work must also be done in the South to make sure they have what they need when they get here. For that reason, Ducks Unlimited's Chad Courville works tirelessly to make sure that suitable habitat is ready and available for early migrants like teal.

"The biggest opportunity we have to help teal and other early migrants," said Courville in his Lafayette office, "is the management of idle agricultural fields."

Courville believes that the southwestern Louisiana rice industry is vital to waterfowl, especially early migrants like teal, pintail, northern shovelers and gadwall, and residents like the mottled duck.

The standard farming procedure for rice growers in southwest Louisiana is to grow rice one year and leave those fields idle the next. Since farmers all work on different schedules, there are always idle fields on the landscape. Most are plowed over and left dry. These idle fields, if left alone, will begin producing first succession native vegetation. The farmer does not desire this vegetation but ducks do. Courville believes farmers, in an effort to let their land work for ducks, should put water on lightly disked idle fields or roll them after flooding. They hold the key to what early arriving ducks really need. Courville calls them, "duck groceries."

"Right now (end of June), those guys that had their fields in rice production last year, harvested it last August, and flooded it for crawfish are now pulling their traps off and draining the water. Those fields are coming up with unbelievable duck groceries. There may be barnyard millet, all kinds of annual grasses and other species unwanted by farmers. With idle field management for ducks, the ducks will eat the grasses that the farmer doesn't want," said Courville.

Idle agricultural field management, then, has many benefits. Teal and other ducks benefit because they arrive and find plentiful habitat with a strong food base. Farmers have a new management plan that benefits their farms and the local environment, and they possibly have one

The September teal split, even if it is shortened by federal regulations, is still a great time to get out, enjoy nature and carry on the tradition.

After a long summer of training, the author's dog Beaux finally gets to put his skills to the test.



Photo by Marty Cannon

more mode of income in offering hunts or leases during the September split and later big duck season.

Teal hunting and rice farming become intertwined in an amazing way. For Courville, he gets to fulfill a love for helping and hunting waterfowl and he works to sustain another great Louisiana tradition: rice farming.

"The reason you want that early water," added Courville, "especially at that time of year, is because it's dry up and down the flyway and (early migrants) are looking for habitat. Those working landscapes are so good for ducks because they have an unbelievable infrastructure and can hold consistent water."

One of the special things about teal in Louisiana is that we are some of the few that get to hunt them.

Courville added that idle field management, "is good for ducks, good for farmers, good for the local stores, tractor dealerships and the local economy. Ducks and rice are a natural fit. The role of the rice industry is critical because if they go away and if those fields are left idle for too long, they become unproductive to ducks."

That would spell the end to a special Louisiana hunting tradition. Fortunately, teal and teal hunters are still getting what they need and that makes for some incredible early morning theatrics that young and old alike enjoy.

Teal have an uncanny way of busting up a morning conversation and testing the very fibers that keep your heart going. Anyone that has sat in a blind and had a hat blown off by a screaming bunch of blue-wings knows what I'm talking about. There is just no topping the excitement of hunting teal in Louisiana's swamps, marshes, ponds, lakes and rice fields.

Oftentimes during the special teal split, the hunt is over as fast as it began. When you are strictly hunting teal, never let your guard down because that's when a squadron of them always appear—and then disappear. They are amazingly fast and a shooter's great rival.

The early September split is a great way to introduce young people to the world of duck hunting. Young children are the future of hunting and conservation in America. We have nothing without them and we fail ourselves if we don't teach them about this great sport and the lengths taken to protect this rich tradition.

Capt. Erik Rue, owner of Calcasieu Charter Service, invites hunters to participate in the early teal split. Lately, he's seen

Photo by Joe Mac Hudspeth





Photo by Marty Cannon

interest in the early teal season dwindle some because of the shortened split, but he feels that it's a prime time to introduce young kids to the sport.

"When you take kids hunting, you need to make sure that they are doing the shooting," stressed Rue.

"And the worst thing you can do is take a kid out on a boring trip, but that's rarely the case during teal season. During that teal season, the birds can get real thick, especially on opening day when there are a lot of birds coming in like crazy!"

Rue takes his clients out to rice fields to hunt teal. There are no fancy frills and no major productions. He doesn't believe you need to thoroughly hide in order to hunt teal because it's such a fast hunt. A simple decoy spread and grinning hunters are all you really need. When teal are in south Louisiana, they're coming in fast and furious.

"I have a lot of hunters that bring their kids down to hunt with us," said Rue.

"I had this one group of kids that started coming out years ago. One of the boys asked his mom to set him up on trips with me because his dad wasn't a hunter. He was a well mannered kid and did very well and soon he started bringing some of his friends that were in the same situation as him."

"I can remember taking them on teal hunts and they all handled themselves very well. And the birds were thick! Once they got it in their blood, they were rabid about it all! They're all hunters now and

grown up but I still see them. That's what it takes to get them hooked on hunting."

"One of the important things that kids need to learn is that it's not all about the killing. Those days of killing big limits every day are going away. The enjoyment is still there though and that's what kids need to see."

Kids seem to grasp that concept more than adults sometimes do. While a capable adult with the assets to teach can continue the tradition of waterfowl hunting in Louisiana by taking a kid to the field, the kids may very well do some teaching of their own.

The tradition of teal hunting is alive and well in Louisiana but it comes at a cost. To sustain a tradition, it must be honored, passed on to the youth and worked on 365 days a year. Be a hero and take a kid hunting and get involved in supporting wildlife conservation. Even the smallest contributions will pay out big dividends in the future.

Marty Cannon is an elementary school administrator in Lafayette. He writes outdoor articles in his spare time and is a member of the Louisiana Outdoor Writers Association and the Outdoor Writers Association of America.

Photo by Marty Cannon



The managed idle fields at Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge are a prime example of attractive duck habitat and a good management tool for rice growers in Louisiana.

The author with his son and niece after a quick morning teal shoot. Getting kids excited about hunting and teaching them how to do it safely will ensure a long-lasting tradition.

MANAGING THE 'GATOR



LDWF File Photo

Story by
Ruth ELSEY

*LDWF's
alligator
program
has
evolved
from a
small wild
harvest
back in
1972, to
the highly
regulated
multi-
million-
dollar
industry it
is today.*

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) has developed wise management programs for one of our state's most valuable resources—the American alligator. Over the years, carefully designed research projects led to successful “sustained use” harvest programs of wild sub-adult and adult alligators, as well as alligator eggs which can be collected by licensed alligator farmers from suitable wetland habitats statewide.

These programs benefit the many Louisiana citizens who elect to participate in them, including private landowners, alligator trappers, alligator farmers and their employees, alligator buyers and dealers and others. In 2004, the value of just the raw alligator hides and meat was approximately \$36 million.

Numerous dedicated LDWF employees are involved in the day-to-day operations needed to implement the alligator programs, loosely categorized into the wild harvest program and the farm program. In addition to these, we also maintain a nuisance alligator program to handle human-alligator conflicts and an active research and monitoring program, which is important to ensure that our harvest programs are indeed conservative and not detrimental to the wild population of alligators.

One of the most important (as well as time consuming and labor intensive) parts of the alligator program involves the mandatory release of alligators from farms to the wild. Because alligator farmers are allowed to collect eggs from the wild (which helps avoid natural mortality factors such as flooding, predation and desic-

cation), we must replace the portion of juvenile alligators to the wild that we estimate would have survived on their own, had the eggs not been collected. Extensive research suggests this is about 14 percent of the eggs hatched. Thus, the alligator farmer may keep 86 percent of the hatchlings obtained from collected eggs, grow these to harvestable size and sell the valuable hides and meat. The other 14 percent must be released back to the wetlands from which the eggs were collected within two years of collection, when the alligators are around four or five feet in length.

Here's when life gets pretty hectic for LDWF's alligator crew. A normal release season from mid-March until late August can involve statewide travel to measure, mark, tag, measure and sack 40,000 to 50,000 alligators, which are amazingly strong when our employees try to ease them into burlap sacks for the trip to the marsh to be released to their wetlands of origin.

It's hard to describe a typical day for the alligator crew members—every day can be different for every member of the crew, depending on the season and each employee's domicile. For example, Melvin Bertrand serves as crew chief during alligator releases. Melvin is a 14-year LDWF veteran who has worked with the release program nearly since its inception. Along the way, he's worked in almost every capacity of the alligator program, working up from his entry level position to his present position as a Wildlife Technician 4. The day prior to a release, Melvin checks and loads his supplies and gear for the next day's

release. This includes burlap sacks, web tags, tie straps, gloves, measuring table, calculators, data sheets and the paperwork indicating how many alligators the farmer owes to various landowners.

Since many alligator farms are located long distances from Melvin's domicile at Rockefeller, his morning starts early. He often gets up before 4 a.m. so he can leave his house by 4:30. Next he drives from Creole to Grand Chenier, where he hooks up his utility trailer at the Rockefeller office. He then loads bottled water for the crew in an ice chest and starts on his way. He picks up his coworker Phillip "Scooter" Trosclair, a Biologist 2.

Scooter, like many of our department's biologists, started employment as a student worker. Student jobs are excellent opportunities for wildlife students to gain experience in resource management and try a career they would like to pursue. After obtaining his bachelor's degree in wildlife management from McNeese State University, Scooter joined the department full time in late 1999.

Melvin and Scooter then pick up another coworker, who they'll meet in Rayne or Kaplan. Dwayne LeJeune has been with the department since March 2001. His unique background with experience in rice and crawfish farming gives him particular insight when dealing with our state's alligator farmers. With his years of experience, he has advanced through the training series to his current position as a Technician 4.

Meanwhile, the other two permanent alligator crew members (who are domiciled in the New Iberia office) have likewise been up early coordinating their meeting point for the day's release. Crystal Boullion joined the department in May 2001 with a degree in resource biology/biodiversity from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. After some experience with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, she advanced to serving LDWF as a Biologist 2. Riding with Crystal to the job site is Russell Perry, a Wildlife Technician 4 who has been with the department since February 1998. Russell earned his college degree in Virginia, and his three years in the Marine Corps have him accustomed to the nomadic lifestyle the alligator crew experience during spring and summer, traveling statewide about four days per work week.



LDWF File Photo

The permanent alligator crew employees are sometimes assisted by temporary employees (and occasionally students) while they release juvenile alligators to the wild, which requires a seven-person team. Alligator farms are scattered all over the state, from Cut Off to Winnsboro to Hackberry and West Monroe. Overnight stays are often the most efficient way to handle releases done at multiple farms in distant locations.

The crew generally tries to arrive at farms early, depending on the season and the quantity of alligators the farmer plans to release. Once the crew arrives at the farm, the release table is set up and the crew goes to work. The farmer has usually taped the mouths of most of the alligators to be released to assist with the release process.

The animal to be released is handed to Melvin, who passes the head of the alligator to Russell. Russell holds the head of the

Eggs collected from the wild avoid natural mortality factors such as flooding, predation and desiccation. However, once hatched, a percentage of these must be released back to the wetlands from which the eggs were collected within two years.

Russell Perry loads a tagged alligator into a burlap sack, while Melvin Bertrand starts the process on the next alligator for release to the wild.

Photo by Ruth Elsey



Scooter Trosclair throws a PVC pole to mark an alligator nest, while Dwayne LeJeune navigates and marks the nest location on a GPS unit. They'll later visit the nest to collect the eggs for research.



Photo by Victor Monsour

alligator snugly on the table, which has markings etched on it to measure the alligator. Melvin calls out the length to Crystal and then permanently marks the alligator by cutting out two of the alligator's tail scutes (armored bone plates). Meanwhile, Scooter has placed one web tag with a six-digit identification number between the toes of one rear foot of the alligator. Melvin and Russell then turn the alligator over (not as easy as it sounds) so Melvin can check the sex. Russell holds the other rear foot of the alligator so Dwayne can place the second web tag on the foot. Then they slide the alligator off the table into a burlap sack, and the process begins on the next alligator. It takes about 15 to 20 seconds per alligator to complete the process. Once the burlap sack has two alligators inside, the crew lifts the sack off the hooks, twists the heavy burlap bag shut with a tie wrap and then hauls it to a livestock trailer or a shady spot prior to release. Crystal is busy recording the data, keeping a running average of the length and doing complex calculations as to how many alligators of that size are required to fulfill the release obligations for each landowner.

This process may seem lengthy, but since the crew has worked together for many years, it works like an assembly line. They can often work around 200 alligators per hour, if the alligators aren't too large, and if

only one or two egg contract permits are being worked. If the alligators are unusually large, or if multiple small permits (which require frequent changes of data sheets and math reconfirmation) are worked, the process slows down considerably. Every day and every farm are different, and the alligator crew has learned to be flexible. They often work 800 to 1,000 alligators a day, but that's only under ideal conditions. Usually, when July and August temperatures and humidity come into play, lesser quantities are worked to avoid heat exhaustion. The crew often finishes working the alligators somewhere between noon and 1:30 p.m. Then, the gear is loaded, the crew stops somewhere for a quick lunch and either begins their drive back to their domiciles or to a hotel near the site of the next day's release. In the spring and summer of 2004, the alligator crew tagged about 47,000 juvenile alligators to be returned to the

wild; in 2003, they tagged over 50,000 alligators.

Year-round, farmers may process alligator hides to be shipped for tanning and later processing into high quality leather goods. All alligator hides (from farms and wild harvest) must be inspected by LDWF alligator crew employees to be sure a federal CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) tag is affixed in the tail. This tag has a number to trace its source back to the trapper or farmer to whom it was issued. These inspections may be just a few hides for taxidermy for a trapper or large lots of over a thousand hides that a farmer or dealer is shipping commercially. The alligator crew verifies that each hide listed on the export manifest is in the crate to be shipped, replaces any broken tags with substitute tags and calculates and collects the tag fees and severance taxes. Again, our crew travels statewide to processing sheds or dealers' warehouses to conduct these mandatory inspections. These fees fund the alligator program, which operates by income generated within the industry, and does not rely on general funds. Last year, our crew conducted 352 hide inspections statewide totaling more than 305,000 skins.

The alligator crew members also stay busy year-round with duties related to the wild harvest held each September. We

have recently been converting landowner property descriptions to a digital format, encompassing land ownership, marsh type (fresh, intermediate, brackish, saline or swamp), and parish lines. This system helps us more accurately assess each piece of property and allocate quotas for alligators to be harvested. Delineating the wetlands and calculating percentages owned (divided interests between several trappers) is very complex and time consuming. The necessary paperwork includes review of hunter applications, landowner leases, maps and property assessments and keeps the alligator crew members busy on days when they are not in the field conducting releases to the wild or hide inspections.

When the September season approaches, the crew participates in the actual issuance of CITES tags and licenses to approximately 1,900 trappers throughout the state. Throughout the month-long harvest, they are stationed in processing sheds at numerous locations to collect scientific data on the harvested alligators, including sex ratio, lengths, and data on any "retraps" of alligators that were previously released from a farm and later harvested in the wild. They may do dissections and collect tissues (stomachs, reproductive tracts or muscle samples) for scientific study at the same time.

During spring and summer, our staff is also involved in research studies. These involve surveying and marking alligator nests by helicopter, collecting alligator eggs for incubation, catching alligators (sometimes during daytime, but usually at night) for blood samples and other projects. Detailed data collection is needed, and the

Photo by Victor Monsour



Photo by Victor Monsour

results are carefully analyzed and often presented at conferences or published in scientific journals.

One might think that things slow down for the alligator crew during winter, when wild alligators are inactive and it's too cool to do releases to the wild. Late fall and winter mean three things to the alligator crew: data entry, data entry and more data entry. It takes several months to compile and enter all the information we have gathered during the very busy spring and summer months. This includes the data from releases to the wild, September season retraps and sex ratios, shipping data from manifests, data from research projects and continued updates of landowner information for the digital files relative to the wild harvest, just to name a few.

During the winter we also maintain captive alligators, hatched from eggs we collected in summer for research projects, or larger alligators that we caught from the wild. We conduct various research projects, sometimes with collaborators from universities, both domestic and international. The captive alligators are cleaned, fed and monitored daily by the alligator crew members stationed at Rockefeller Refuge. Periodically the alligators are sampled, which may

Ruth Elsey and Scooter Trosclair measure a female alligator caught at a nest, after having taken a blood sample from the alligator for scientific study. Airboats are used to access remote nest sites in the interior marsh.

Scooter Trosclair and Ruth Elsey collect alligator eggs from a nest for incubation at the field laboratory. The eggs are marked to maintain an upright orientation, to enhance embryo survival.



Photo by Scooter Trosclair

Crystal Boullion takes a blood sample from a large alligator caught for plasma hormone analysis, while Dwayne LeJeune holds the alligator steady.

Every alligator hide taken in Louisiana (farm and wild) is inspected by LDWF employees before it can be shipped for taxidermy or tanning. Last year Louisiana produced more than 300,000 hides for use in the international leather market.

include taking a blood sample or a biopsy, and the alligators are then weighed and measured. We have recently initiated several studies on the interactions between alligators and nutria, and how we can assist with efforts to control nutria and their devastating effects on vegetative losses which threaten our valuable wetlands. We often assist graduate students with capture of research animals or provide alligator eggs or parts for study.

Because the alligator program is so large and citizens statewide participate in the harvests, numerous other dedicated department employees help with administration of the alligator program in addition to their regular duties. Cooperation between divisions within the agency helps keep this valuable program running smoothly, and ensures citizens in all regions can get assistance

with alligator issues by professionals domiciled in the nearest regional office.

We're also pleased that many non-consumptive users benefit from the wild alligator resource, in addition to citizens who participate in the harvest programs. The mystique and aesthetic value of seeing a large wild alligator is of value to locals and visitors to our state. Many tourists and photographers travel long distances for the opportunity to get a glimpse of this unique species in the wild.

That just about sums up the myriad activities of our alligator crew employees. The LDWF alligator program has evolved from the first small, very limited, wild harvest back in 1972, to the highly regulated multi-million dollar industry it is now. Through the dedicated efforts of many LDWF employees, we hope to continue improving our programs for the future benefit of our state's citizens.

Ruth Elsey is a Biologist Manager in the Fur and Refuge Division. An LDWF employee since 1991, she works in the department's alligator management and research programs.

Photo by Ruth Elsey



WANT TO BE A PART OF THE WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES TEAM?

For more information on job opportunities with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, visit www.civilservice.louisiana.gov.

CELEBRATE THE GREAT OUTDOORS WITH THE LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES!

Saturday, September 24, 2005
9 a.m. until 3 p.m.



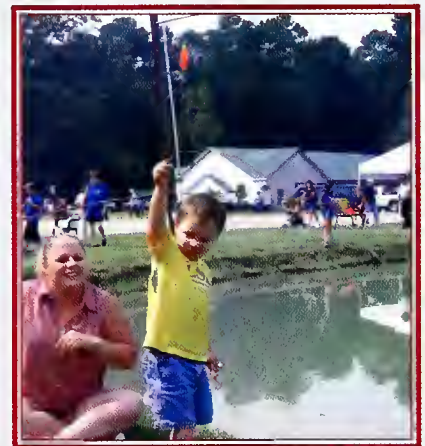
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TRACKING MALLARDS

Story by
Adam EINCK

Photos by
**NE and SW
Study GROUPS**

Duck hunters are always seeking new information on ducks' flight patterns, habitat choices and anything else that might improve their odds in the pursuit of their quarry. Hunters and conservationists are also looking to answer questions about the declining duck hunter success, as evidenced by the tenfold increase in calls from concerned Louisiana duck hunters in the last three to four years.

Hunters and biologists have raised specific concerns about mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and their change in numbers and distribution, which is why the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), Ducks Unlimited (DU), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey's Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at Louisiana State University (LSU) and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry are cooperating on a two-year research project to track mallards in southwestern and northeastern areas of the state using radio telemetry.

"Part of the incentive for this research was to address recurring questions from duck hunters over the past few years about reduced numbers of ducks and poor hunting success," said Robert Helm, LDWF waterfowl program manager.

Two LSU graduate students are heading the study that started last fall in two different locations. Bruce Davis has based his work in the northeastern part of the state and Paul Link has concentrated his efforts in the southwestern part of the state. Main objectives of the study are to document local and long-range movements of mallards, determine the types of habitats used and develop estimates of survival rates for mallards wintering in the South.

"We are all very interested in getting new information on mallard survival, movements and habitat use. State and federal agencies, and Ducks Unlimited, will all be able to use this information to refine their habitat conservation programs," said Tom Moorman, Director of Conservation Planning for DU.

The study groups trapped mallards by baiting them into swim-in traps or rocket fired nets. Due to federal baiting regulations, which stipulate that no one can hunt in a baited area until all the bait has been

removed for 10 days, both researchers had to stray from their original plan of sampling mallards equally from both hunted and non-hunted lands and instead had to trap all of their mallards on state and federal refuges.

Once they trapped the mallards, Davis and Link banded the ducks, determined their age and sex, weighed them and took several measurements of their body sizes. Then they attached radio transmitters to the mallards. All birds were given food and water while in captivity and released in fewer than 24 hours to minimize potential handling effects.

"I instrumented each bird with a harness-type transmitter that had a battery life of 160 days," Link said. "The radios pulsed at 50 beats per minute and were coded to pulse double every 10 beats to distinguish them from other frequencies. Mortality switches were placed on the transmitters that would cause the pulse rates to double if the mallards remained motionless for more than four hours."

After marking the mallards, the researchers switched to tracking mode. The researchers used trucks equipped with large antennas, GPS units and laptop computers to monitor and locate the mallards.



The mallard telemetry study showed that few birds moved between the study areas, suggesting that birds wintering in our state quickly find suitable habitat.



Ducks were captured by various methods, including swim-in traps like the one shown above.

Once the ducks were captured, researchers attached radio harnesses to track their movement.

They used airplanes equipped with telemetry gear and towers with antennas to help locate birds that were inaccessible by truck. Once they located a bird, they took readings from three different points to determine its precise location.

When collecting data, the researchers had to be careful not to interfere with the birds. "We avoided flushing birds with telemetry vehicles whenever possible to minimize investigator disturbance," Davis said. "To avoid sampling bias toward more easily accessible habitats, I collected habitat use data only on days aircraft were used."

Data from the first year of the study are still being evaluated, but the researchers have offered some general observations that stood out. "Both Bruce and I were surprised at the high retention rate of marked birds," Link said. "We had very few birds moving between our study areas, which has me believing that birds that winter in Louisiana quickly find suitable habitats."

Davis added, "Ducks in this environment with abundant habitat and food resources close at hand do not have to make extensive foraging flights to meet their needs." They both also noted that when the ducks decided to head north in the spring, most would fly across several states without stopping.

The researchers and LDWF staff were also surprised at the late departure of the mallards from both sites. "We expected the

ducks to leave by mid-February, but most of these birds stayed until late March and early April," Helm said.

NORTHEAST STUDY AREA

The northeast study area was north of Monroe within the Mississippi Alluvial Valley (MAV), which is the most significant wintering area for mallards in North America. The core study area encompassed a 50-mile radius around trapping locations, including portions of the MAV in northeastern Louisiana and southeastern Arkansas. Davis said he and his technicians trapped ducks on the Mollicy Unit of the Upper Ouachita National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), near the Arkansas state line.

The unit is a 16,000 acre area of Upper Ouachita NWR and is located on the east side of the Ouachita River. The Mollicy Unit was cleared for agriculture in the 1960s and is currently undergoing extensive reforestation. About 2,460 acres are free from reforestation efforts and are currently in rice agriculture or left uncultivated and dominated by moist soil vegetation.



Davis trapped and radio-marked 91 mallards, of which 61 were adults and 30 were juveniles, from Nov. 27 to Dec. 15, 2004. He marked 57 mallards from swim-in traps and 34 from rocket nets. The average weight of adult mallards was 2.67 pounds and immature mallards averaged 2.42 pounds.

Davis then monitored survival of the mallards from Nov. 28, 2004 to April 10, 2005. During this time, 18 mallards died on the core study area, including 11 adult and seven immature birds. "I attributed four deaths to unknown predators, three to predatory birds, two to mammalian predators and two to unknown circumstances," Davis said. "Hunting was the direct cause in seven mortalities, of which four were adults."

The core study area was monitored during the split season, second hunting season segment and for two and one-half months after the hunting season last year. Davis broke down the core study area into habitat categories such as forested wetlands, reforestation areas, rice, other crops and moist soil to determine habitat use by the mallards. Public versus private lands and lands legally closed to duck hunting versus lands open to duck hunting were also recognized. During the second hunting season segment the mallards used forested wetlands over half of the time and reforestation areas accounted for close to 20 percent of the use. The ducks used lands open to hunting over 60 percent of the time. They used public lands closed to hunting almost 40 percent of the time.

"The extensive use of bottomland hardwoods as well as the wide use of public lands open to hunting and pri-



vate lands (also presumed open to hunting) are the two components of habitat use that stand out to me," Davis explained.

SOUTHWEST STUDY AREA

The southwest study area was in the Gulf Coast Chenier Plain (GCCP) southeast of Lake Charles. The GCCP extends 40 to 70 miles inland along the Gulf of Mexico from roughly Galveston Bay, Texas, to Vermilion Bay. It includes nearly 6.5 million acres of coastal marsh, prairie and rice-growing areas. Link concentrated his efforts within a 50-mile radius of trapping sites. The two sites were at Cameron Prairie NWR and LDWF's White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area.

Once outfitted with radio harnesses, mallards are transported back to their natural habitats.



Before the ducks were released, researchers banded them and collected measurement data.

Link trapped and radio marked 71 mallards, of which 52 were adults and 19 were immatures from Dec. 21, 2004, to Jan. 10, 2005. Link's final sample size was 67 birds because four died after being caught, of which 49 were adults and 18 were immatures. The average weight of adult mallards was 2.44 pounds and immature mallards averaged 2.3 pounds.

"Trapping was difficult in southwest Louisiana to say the least," Link said. "Low numbers of mallards, in addition to birds not responding to bait, made capturing significant numbers of mallards incredibly tough."

Dr. Alan Afton, adjunct professor at LSU, who is coordinating efforts between the two researchers said, "This turned out to be a very difficult fall and winter to trap mallards."

Link monitored survival and observed habitat use from Jan. 4 to April 4, 2005. He also continued to track two birds through April 18 to see how long they would stay.

During the tracking period, there were 14 mallard mortalities, including nine adult and five immature birds. Hunting accounted for nine of these deaths, avian predators caused four deaths and one was unknown and was sent to the National Wildlife Health Research Center in Madison, Wis., for an autopsy.

"Of those killed by avian predators, three were killed by great horned owls, two from the same nest," Link said. "The fourth was observed being eaten by a crested caracara." (The crested caracara is an uncommon bird in south Louisiana.)

The other mallard killed by a great horned owl was recovered at the Gueydan Duck Festival's main building. The researchers saw mallard feathers on the ground in the building, and then looked up to see the dead mallard in the rafters with its feet down.

Aerial telemetry flights were conducted 88 times to locate the entire sample of mallards present on the core study area to determine the habitats used. Link identified marsh, uncultivated agricultural land, rice, forested wetlands and moist soil as habitats used by mallards. Initial analyses showed that over 40 percent of the locations were in marsh and 12 percent were on uncultivated agricultural land.

Furthermore, Link only has preliminary information so far and is not ready to make quantitative statements on movement of the mallards, but he did have some general observations. "There was really no pattern to describe movements," Link said. "Some birds rarely used the same location more than once, while other birds remained within a mile for weeks at a time."

Neither researcher expects big changes in next year's study design, because they cannot predict reliably when the mallards will arrive due to constant habitat and climate change. Link said he will "hire technicians, get equipment calibrated and wait for the mallards to arrive."

Adam Einck is the News and Media Relations Officer for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Below, a researcher releases a mallard back to the wild. The next task is to track the birds and synthesize the study's findings.



Stay tuned to LDWF's Web site for continued updates on this study. (www.wlf.louisiana.gov)

MALLARD

Anas platyrhynchos

Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) are the most abundant, heavily hunted, and widely known waterfowl in the United States. Part of a group known as dabblers or puddle ducks, the mallard is the ancestor of many domestic duck species.

Mallards are large and stocky, and have a bluish violet patch of color bordered by white strips on their wings. Drakes have a distinctive dark green head, white neck ring, chestnut brown chest, brownish back, gray sides, black rump, white outer tail feathers, up-curved black central tail feathers, coral-red legs and feet and a yellowish-green bill. Drakes also utter a soft, hoarse call. Drakes average 24.7 inches in length and 2.7 pounds.

Hens are a mottled brownish color with a dark brown crown and stripe running through their eyes to help conceal them while nesting. The rest of a hen's head is a lighter brown than her upper body with brown marks on an orange bill. Hens also have orange legs and feet and voice a loud series of

quacks. Hens average 23 inches in length and 2.4 pounds.

The mallard is one of the last of the dabbling ducks to migrate to the South, usually in November and December, proving they can withstand the cold as long as they still have open water. During their yearly pilgrimage south, mallards make use of a wide range of habitats from agricultural lands to flooded timber. They mostly migrate using the Mississippi Flyway from Manitoba and Saskatchewan through the Midwestern United States to the Mississippi Alluvial Valley.

Mallards are highly adaptable and use many different habitats. They are usually found in fresh water, but can live in saltwater canals and brackish marshes along the coast. Mallards prefer shallow marsh, because they cannot dive very deep. Mallards can also exist in dry agricultural fields, rice fields and oak dominated wetlands.

The prairie pothole region of Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba and North Dakota is where most

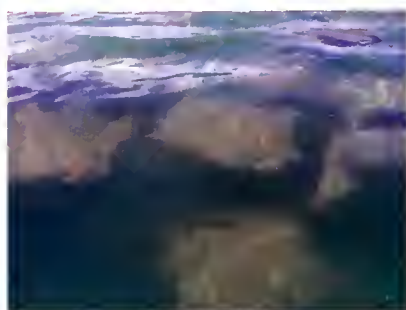
mallard breeding takes place. Breeding starts with several drakes pursuing a hen. The hen ends the chase by touching a drake with her bill, and the pair then flies off together. The hen picks a concealed nesting site in tall weeds and grass and the drake sticks with the hen until true incubation begins.

The nest is made of grass, reeds or brush and lined with their soft breast feathers, called down. Mallards lay an average of nine eggs, which hatch after approximately 26 days. Only hens take part in the nurturing process. Ducklings can leave the nest with the hens about 13 to 16 hours after hatching, and hens usually take care of their broods until they can fly, around 52 to 70 days.

Mallards will eat almost anything. They will eat acorns, aquatic plants, seeds from moist-soil plants, corn, rice, barley and wheat. During breeding season, mallards need a lot of protein and eat more larvae, dragonflies, snails, freshwater shrimp and earthworms.

Photo by Erwin and Peggy Bauer/USFWS





Looking Forward, Looking Back: The Gulf of Mexico by Sea Kayak

Story by
Jill WILSON

Photos by
**Arthur
HEBERT and
Larry KOENIG**

On August 21, 2004, Louisiana natives Arthur Hebert and Larry Koenig completed an historic circumnavigation of the Gulf of Mexico by sea kayak. With this accomplishment, the modern-day explorers join the ranks of other adventuresome duos who have explored this nation, the state of Louisiana and the mighty Mississippi. From its meager beginnings to its rush to the sea, the Mississippi River built the land so many of us call home, land at risk of being lost if nothing is done to save it.

The Mississippi River held a special allure for early explorers of this continent. In 1673, Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette were the first French expedition to explore the Mississippi River. From the Mississippi down past the Missouri and Ohio rivers, they reached the mouth of the Arkansas River before their journey ended.

Upon acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, President Jefferson charged the famous team of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark with exploring part of the Missouri/Mississippi River System, the largest in North America. Their expedition aimed to ascend the Missouri River, cross the Continental Divide and descend the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean. Leaving from St. Louis, their journey was heralded as a success as it suc-

ceeded in finding a much-sought-after northwest passage to the Pacific.

Like Lewis and Clark, the George Hunter and William Dunbar Expedition was also charged by President Jefferson to explore this same river system, focusing on regions west of the Mississippi, including the Ouachita and Red River valleys. Unlike Lewis and Clark, their journey did not lead them to the Pacific. However, their exploration of the Red and Ouachita rivers yielded useful information about the areas, including knowledge of local Indian tribes and the hot springs of Arkansas. (More recently, I recall a pair of local boys, Storm and Wilson, who set out to explore the woods near Calhoun, and got lost on a trip commissioned by neither President Jefferson nor their parents.)

And then came Arthur Hebert and Larry Koenig. Like the explorers from times past, they entered into their journey with a certain sense of adventure, but also with the skill and preparation that are required of a successful mission. Earlier explorers were eager to follow the river and see where it might lead. Our modern-day explorers know right where it leads, and that's where their adventure began—the Gulf of Mexico.

After years of coordination and planning, Hebert and Koenig set out for La Costa del Golfo, meaning “The Gulf Coast” in Spanish, a circumnavigation of the Gulf of Mexico by sea kayak. Phase I, a trip of 139 days, from Feb. 9 to June 26, 2003, launched from Grand Isle, and headed west along the coasts of Louisiana, Texas and Mexico, and ended at Isla Mujeres, Mexico, with a tropical storm threatening. Phase 2 began on May 23, 2004, and launched from Key West, Florida. The paddlers traveled counterclockwise, completing their circumnavigation by returning to Grand Isle on Aug. 21, 2004.

Paddling an average of 15 miles per day during phases 1 and 2, the kayakers covered nearly 4,000 miles over the entire trip. Throughout both phases, the two maintained contact with friends, family and fans through their interactive Web site www.lacostadelgolfo.com. Daily posts on the site ranged from accounts of wildlife sightings—pelicans, brown turtles, hammerhead sharks, roseate spoonbills, manatees,

jellyfish, swallowtail kites, just to name a few—to the warm welcomes they received from supportive folks along the way.

It's evident by their posts that being able to experience the gulf coast in such an intimate way was a transforming experience. But the two also acknowledge that interaction with people along the coast was a particularly rewarding part of the experience.

In a post from June 17, 2004, while taking a break in the Tampa area, Koenig writes: “For me, this business of kayaking is great in large part because of the host of good people involved with paddling boats. They come from all over the world and often gather at places like this. It makes me feel like part of something bigger than myself and that is good. Paddling through and around the coast of the Gulf of Mexico has the same effect. Clearly, the world is bigger and more intensely interactive than we can generally realize without getting into it. I'm so glad to have this opportunity to do it.”

Prior to the Gulf of Mexico circumnavigation, Hebert and Koenig executed other

Opposite page: Buoy between Bald Point and Alligator River south of Tallahassee; the skimmer rookery of Freemason Island in Chandeleur Sound; school of manta rays between Everglades National Park and the Florida Keys; Koenig's camping hammock on Keaton Beach.

The Cape St. George Lighthouse in Florida, whose sand base was washed away by Hurricanes Andrew and Opal in the 80s.





Above: Stopping for the night at a pier east of Panama City, Koenig is serenaded by a violinist rehearsing for a beach wedding.

Below: Arthur, using a skill he learned in Mexico during Phase 1, climbs a tree at Everglades Park to retrieve a child's shoe.



Below: After spending the night on this narrow spit of sand on East Island near Biloxi, Hebert takes a moment to prepare for the long, exposed crossing to the Chandeleurs under the threat of Tropical Storm Bonnie.



successful paddling pursuits. Among others, Hebert boasts an open canoe crossing of Lake Pontchartrain in 1990, a solo canoe circumnavigation of the same lake in 1992 and a sea kayak crossing of the Gulf of Mexico in 1998.

Koenig has honed his skills whitewater paddling in Arkansas and the Pacific Northwest, as well as navigating through the coastal waterways of the northwestern Gulf of Mexico and many rivers of the American West. As for the future, Hebert is currently planning an east-to-west crossing of the Gulf of Mexico scheduled for the spring of 2007, from Everglades City, Florida, to Matamoros, Mexico, roughly 1,100 statute miles.

It has been a little over a year since the two completed their circumnavigation, but the memories are still fresh on their minds. Hebert and Koenig say they will never forget their experiences on that journey, but likewise continue to emphasize their desire to increase awareness of America's Wetland, one of the largest and most productive expanses of coastal wetlands in North America. This valuable landscape extending along Louisiana's coast is disappearing at an alarming rate of 35 square miles per year.

America's Wetland is the seventh largest delta on earth and is the heart of an intricate ecosystem on the verge of collapse. Serving as the habitat for millions of waterfowl and migratory birds, as these wetlands disappear a habitat for wildlife and endangered species is threatened; America's offshore oil and gas supply becomes vulnerable; America's seafood supply is in danger; well, pipelines, ports, levies and roads become even more vulnerable; and the world's largest port system is at risk.

As someone who has seen the value of America's Wetland and the urgency of the threats facing it, Koenig penned the following passage upon his return from the expedition:

We've Paddled 360 Degrees

On a cold windy winter day in 2003 we paddled wet out of Grand Isle. Over the months since, our compass needles have shifted to all points around the circle until finally last

week, heading again west, we made final landfall at Grand Isle, Louisiana. Grand Isle is aptly named, being one of the few small bits of high coastal land on the Louisiana coast. Our kayaks carried us through some amazing places: sand barrier beaches and high dunes, volcanic highlands and caves and mangrove swamps. Nowhere else along the Gulf of Mexico coastline did we encounter the kind and extent of amazingly productive fecundity that we encountered along the Mississippi River delta estuary.

In the crystal clear waters of the Yucatan and of Florida Bay, the animal life is obvious. A large shark or a school of manta rays crossing just inches below a kayak draws attention to itself. In Louisiana waters laden with midwestern topsoil, undersea life is less obvious; but, pogy boats with circling spotter planes, shrimp boats dragging their trawls, and oyster harvesters tonging their beds everywhere about make it clear that Louisiana's is a working coast. The phenomenal seafood harvest from the Louisiana coast is greater than anywhere else around the gulf. At the same time, the continuous coming and going of helicopters and oilfield crewboats, the ubiquitous "pipeline crossing" signs, and the nighttime offshore light pollution from oil production rigs and platforms are signs that the Louisiana coast is a very busy place. We don't have million-dollar beachfront lots and multi-story condos going up as fast as they can be built, but we do supply a phenomenal portion of our country's energy and a huge chunk of its seafood. If Louisiana continues to lose over 25 square miles of coastland a year,

our country's energy and gustatory security will remain threatened. (Don't forget, this is where Cajun food and culture comes from, y'all.)

The U.S. will suffer if coastal Louisiana disappears. We have seen the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The Louisiana part may not be the most beautiful or exciting place to paddle a kayak, but it is the most productive bit we have seen. We have got to try to keep it working for us.

Larry Koenig
August 23, 2004

Yes, the problem is great, but so is the potential. Louisiana and its federal partners through the Breaux Act developed the Coast 2050 plan, a blueprint for restoring coastal Louisiana in a way that will sustain its value for the nation and the world. This restoration effort to save America's Wetland will be one of the largest engineering projects ever attempted in this country.

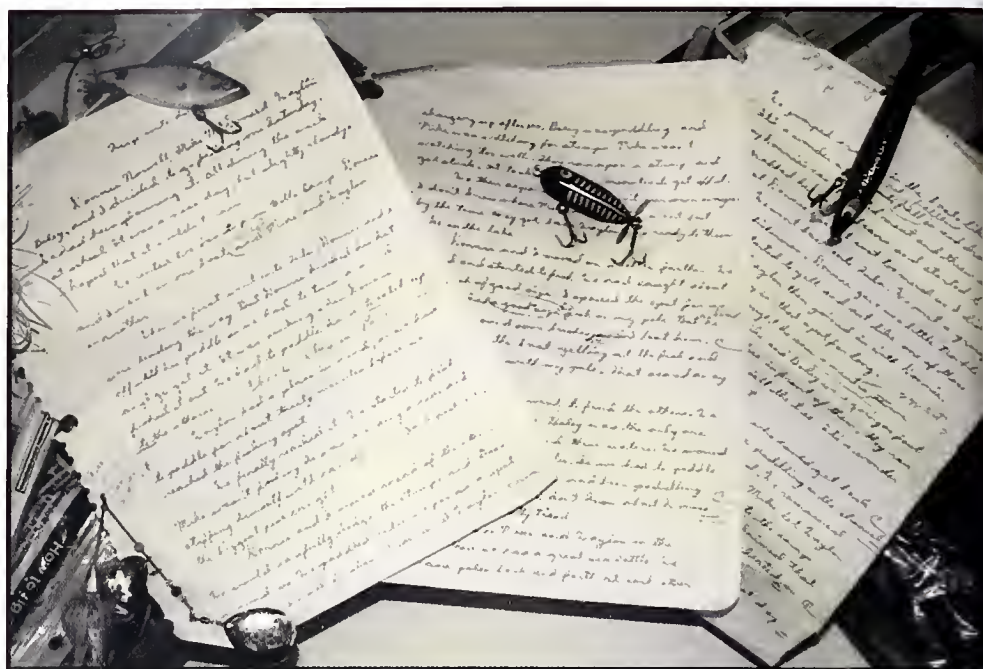
Hebert and Koenig took the matter to the sea, but your measures need not be as drastic. To get involved and learn more about the campaign to save coastal Louisiana, visit www.americaswetland.com.

For more information on Hebert, Koenig or the gulf circumnavigation, see the July/August 2004 issue of *Louisiana Conservationist* or visit the expedition's Web site at www.lacostadelgolfo.com.

Jill Wilson is the editor of *Louisiana Conservationist*.



For information on America's Wetland and the campaign to save coastal Louisiana, please visit www.americaswetland.com.



My First Outdoor Writing Assignment

Story and
Photos by
**David
MORELAND**

"Oh, we love the Halls of Heflin, that surround us here today." Thus began the Alma Mater for Heflin High School. Anyone who drives through the town of Heflin today (south Webster Parish) will find only the archway to the school's entrance still standing. However, for those who attended this small rural school plenty of memories remain. Some of these memories are found in yearbooks neatly arranged on bookshelves or maybe hidden away. These records provide documentation of the activities that occurred year after year, both in and outside of school. I am fortunate to have other written documentation of my time at Heflin.

In 1966 my class of 12 entered the ninth grade and moved into the high school rooms upstairs. (Elementary and junior high were on the first floor of the school.) Mrs. White was our English teacher and it was there that I was given my first outdoor writing assignment. Actually it was to be a short story about something we had done that summer. Now for me summers were quite simple, as I filled my time with three activities of the utmost importance: work, baseball and fishing. I knew immediately what to write about.

Mrs. White was somewhat impressed by my composition and said no doubt I would be working in the outdoors one day. She saved the story and gave it to Dad. He kept it with some other materials and gave it to me a few years before he died.

The story is about a fishing trip I took with some of my friends. I'd like to share it with you now these many years later. Rereading it reminds me of what I loved about the outdoors, back then as a boy and still to this day. With age comes wisdom, among other things, so I have taken the liberty to clean up the mechanics of the piece and correct the spelling. (For the record, I got an A for composition and a B for mechanics.)

TRIP INTO TOULON

Donnie Norwell, Mike McDonald, Waylan Boley, and I decided to go fishing one Saturday. We had been planning this outing all during the week. Saturday finally arrived and it turned out to be a nice day, but with partly cloudy skies. I hoped it would not rain on us.

We rented two boats from Bill's Camp. Donnie and I went in one boat while Mike and Waylan set off in another.

Donnie and I led the way into Toulon. Toulon is the name of a small bayou that flows into Lake Bistineau just south of the Webster/Bienvenue Parish line. Donnie, however, knocked his hat off with his paddle so we had to turn around to retrieve it. It was sinking when Donnie "fished" it out. We

had to paddle hard to catch up with the others.

Waylan had a place in mind to fish, so we paddled for another 30 minutes before reaching the fishing hole.

Upon arrival everyone immediately began fishing, except Mike. He was drinking a coke and stuffing himself with candy. Two jackfish were the biggest fish caught at this spot.

Donnie and I left and paddled ahead of the others. We would carefully dodge the stumps and trees around us. We paddled until we found a spot by some small bushes. Mike and Waylan came sailing up after us. Boley was paddling and Mike was watching for stumps. Mike wasn't watching too well and they ran upon a stump and got stuck. It took them five minutes to finally rock the boat off the stump.

We then separated and went our own ways. I don't know where Mike and Waylan went, but by the time we got together again Waylan was ready to throw Mike in the lake.

Donnie and I decided to move on a little further up into Toulon. We stopped and started to fish. We caught about seven nice fish and then I spoiled the spot. I hooked a good fish but it wrapped my line around some brush and I lost it. I stood up in the boat yelling and fussing at the fish, splashing water with my pole, and scared away all the other fish.

We left that spot and paddled on to find the other boat. We paddled all over Toulon trying to find them. Boley was the only one who knew his way around these waters. We wound up on the opposite side of Toulon and slowly paddled out to the channel of the lake. We had been paddling for about 45 minutes and I was beginning to get pretty tired.

Mike and Waylan were in the channel and immediately a great sea battle erupted. We threw cane poles back and forth at each other; we jumped around in the boats like maniacs. It is a wonder we had not fallen in and drowned. I picked up Donnie's can of potted meat and threw it at them. Then I grabbed his can of beans and started to launch it, but Donnie said it cost too much so I didn't.

When the battle ended we paddled back into Toulon in search of more fish. We passed another group of fishermen and Donnie and Waylan proceeded to cut up and act stupid. We did not stay in that spot too long!

Then Waylan thought he saw a nutria, so we paddled as fast as we could toward it. Mike and Boley were going so fast they did not see the tree in front of them and crashed straight into it. Down fell the tree into the lake. It is a wonder they did not sink their boat.

It was now time to head back so we decided to have a race to see who could get back to the camp first. As we came paddling into the channel Donnie and I were in the lead. We remained in the lead all the way. However, Mike let Waylan out on the bank and he ran to the camp, arriving a few minutes before us. They claimed they won; however, we protested their victory since they had cheated and said we won.

Not many fish were caught that day, but it surely was a great adventure.

EPILOGUE

As you see, my first outdoor story was quite simple. It was a fish story that had absolutely nothing to do with catching fish. But my fishing experiences taught me many things: planning for a trip, learning to maneuver in a boat, exploring nature and, of course, having fun. Hunting and fishing are not about killing and catching, although that is part of it. The kill or catch is secondary, as are limits and trophies. For me, time in the woods or on the water is about enjoying the total outdoor experience, and sharing this with family and friends.

For my friends and me it was adventure, just one of many that we would share together during our days at Heflin. Mike McDonald was my best friend; he did not hunt much but enjoyed fishing and camping. We went off to college together and he was the best man in my wedding. Mike died last summer after a short battle with cancer. Donnie was a forward on our basketball team and played third base in baseball. He had a black and tan hound that we used to chase deer during the hunting season. Donnie, too, has passed away from this earth. Waylan was the Natty Bumpo of the group. He was the pitcher on the baseball team, throwing both knuckle balls and spit balls. He still lives in the Heflin community.

Mrs. White was right about my working in the outdoors. I still fish occasionally on Lake Bistineau. My last visit verifies that there are still plenty of stumps in the lake. But then, that's a story for another time. 🐸

Formerly LDWF's Deer Study Leader, David Moreland currently serves as the Wildlife Division Administrator. He has been with the department since 1976.



HUNTING ADVENTURES

Story by
**Stephen
RODRIGUEZ**

In the bitter month of December in 2003 I was on Christmas holidays and out of school. I decided to wake up early in the morning to go sit in my stand that sits deep in the dark woods overlooking a huge rye grass field to see if anything was going to pass by. I got my gear and headed out around five o'clock. I walked quietly to the back of my property and climbed my deer stand. I had brought my book to read to pass time, and I had to have it finished for when I went back to school. So for about an hour I heard nothing. Then I heard some rustling of small trees. Then a six-point buck walks out onto the bare pasture. I get my scope on him but I still hear some noise so hold my fire. Two big does come out at the same spot and start to graze upon the green grass. I think that is all but no, there are more. A magnificent, gigantic sixteen-point buck walks out on the grass. By now I am really excited. This deer is perfect, eight symmetrical points on each side, it weighed around 240 pounds. The best thing was I had this once in a lifetime opportunity. The buck was around 85 yards away and I knew I could take him and I was already thinking about the bragging rights I had with this buck. I silently raised my gun up and set my sights on his chest. I waited and waited but never pulled the trigger. I just stared at the beauty of the buck. I don't understand why or what inside of me would not allow me to pull the trigger. Today I still see the look on its face, never knowing I was there. I have told my story to my neighbors and they too have seen the beautiful buck and they left it alone. I have never heard of such a magnificent, lucky buck in my life. I know it sounds crazy to do what I did that day but I don't regret it at all.

Stephen Blake Rodriguez of Clinton won second place in the junior division of the 2004 LOWA Youth Journalism Contest.

MY GOOSE HUNT WITH DAD

Story by
**Katherine
JOHNSON**

I had an awesome time with my dad on my first early morning goose hunt. I was extremely excited, even though I had to wake up at three o'clock in the morning. My dad had bought a goose hunt, donated by Mr. Jason, at our church auction. I couldn't wait to shoot my first goose.

My dad and I met Mr. Jason and his black Labrador, Merlin, at a gas station in Jennings. We parked the truck, grabbed our shotguns and rode with Mr. Jason to a traditional stop, Longion's. There we met a bunch of other hunters, all drinking coffee and discussing this year's season and where they were hunting that day. Although we couldn't stay long, it was a really cool store.

When we finally got to our destination, a rice field near Gueydan, I was very enthusiastic. But, what I didn't know was that we had to walk quite a while to our blind, and it was 24 degrees outside, literally freezing. At last we got there and I was very eager to hunt. First we made sure the blind was flawlessly camouflaged, loaded our guns, and got out our goose calls.

I had never practiced with a duck or goose call before and after a minute or two I wasn't allowed to call at all. We saw a whole lot of nothing for a long period of time, then noticed a flock of speckled belly geese in the next field over. So, we decided

if the geese wouldn't come to us we would just have to go to them.

We picked out a spot on the ring levee and decided to head in that direction. Thus, we unloaded our guns and walked through thousands of frozen puddles to this "better spot." We sat down slowly and leaned against the levee wall, then, once again, loaded our guns and started to call to the geese.

Within minutes a few geese were coming toward us. Both my dad and Mr. Jason shot a speckled belly goose. Merlin wagged his tail violently, thrilled to be able to retrieve something that day.

After a half-hour with no other geese in shooting distance, Dad suggested that we should start heading home, although I still wanted to get a bird. I trudged back up to the truck, not wanting my first hunting trip to end. I had a great time that day and look forward to every hunting trip I go on. Waking up in the early hours of the morning, visiting with other hunters at stores like Longion's, and trying to bring home dinner, I love the entire hunting experience. I will share it with my children, just like my dad did with me.

Katherine Johnson of Lake Charles won third place in the junior division of the 2004 LOWA Youth Journalism Contest.

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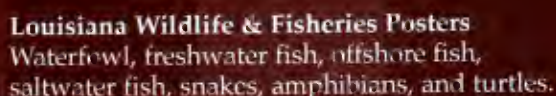
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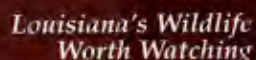
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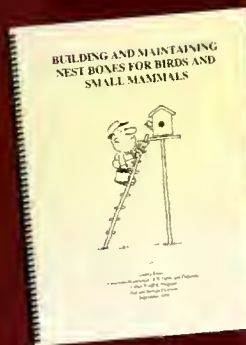
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AGENTS *of* Change

the evolving role of wildlife and fisheries enforcement agents

Legislative Updates

By Major Jeff Mayne

The 2005 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature was a historically significant event due to a new constitutional amendment allowing each legislator to file an additional five general subject matter bills. Previous regular sessions in odd numbered calendar years were confined to fiscal legislation only.

During the 2005 Regular Session of the legislature the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries tracked approximately 84 legislative instruments affecting or involving LDWF in some manner. Bills ranging from vehicular homicide caused by an alcohol impaired boat operator to a study request for development of a state park on Maurepas Wildlife Management Area were addressed.

The department, in coordination with the Governor's Office, had four bills introduced on its behalf. All four bills completed the legislative process successfully. One allows the department to maximize the investment revenues generated by the Lifetime License Endowment Trust (Act 206, Rep. St. Germain). Another made technical corrections to the current line defining where recreational hoop nets and wire nets may be used (Act 371, Rep. St. Germain). The third made adjustments to the inside/outside shrimp and menhaden line in the Breton Chandeaur Sound due to coastal erosion (Act 183, Rep. St. Germain). The final bill

adjusted fees paid by oil companies for seismic exploration on department owned property (Act 89, Rep. Pierre).

Other successful bills affecting the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries were the following:

Act 195, introduced by Rep. Wooton, establishes an additional fee beginning on July 1, 2005, through June 30, 2006, on recreational shrimp trawl gear licenses: \$10 for residents and \$15 for nonresidents, for the use of recreational trawls. The bill also adds an additional fee of \$15 for residents and \$60 for nonresidents for the use of commercial trawls and dedicates the additional revenues to the Shrimp Trade Petition Account.

Act 172, introduced by Rep. T. Powell, increases fees for commercial and recreational crab gear licenses and dedicates the increased revenues to the derelict crab trap removal program and to the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board for the development of additional markets for Louisiana crabs. Relative to recreational crab trap gear licenses which authorize the use of no more than 10 crab traps, present law requires a \$10 per year fee for a resident and a \$40 per year fee for nonresidents. The new law increases the fee for residents to \$15 and \$60 for nonresidents and provides that the additional revenues be deposited into the Derelict Crab Trap Removal Program Account. Concerning commercial crab trap gear licenses which author-

ize the use of any number of legal traps, present law requires a \$25 per year fee for a resident and a \$100 per year fee for nonresidents. The new law increases the fee to \$35 for residents and \$140 for nonresidents and provides that half of the increased revenues from the fee be deposited into the Derelict Crab Trap Removal Program Account and the remaining half be deposited into the Crab Promotion and Marketing Account.

Act 259, introduced by Rep. Baudoin, prohibits a person from claiming as his for any purpose any area or location on state land. It also prohibits the construction of permanent deer stands on state land and requires deer stands to be removed no later than two hours after sunset each day. It specifies that a permanent deer stand present on state land does not confer on any person a right to exclude any other person and exempts land under the jurisdiction of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (Wildlife Management Areas).

Act 102, introduced by Rep. Dartez, enhances the penalties for shrimping during closed season within five years of a previous violation and prohibits issuance of certain gear licenses to such violators for a period of time.

For a complete list of legislation passed in the 2005 legislative session, please visit the Louisiana Legislature Web site at www.legis.state.la.us.

BAYOU PIERRE WMA



Bayou Pierre Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is located in northwest Red River and east-central Desoto parishes, 20 miles south of Shreveport. The WMA is named for Bayou Pierre, which bisects the 2,212 acres of land that lies in the Red River Alluvial Valley.

During the mid-1900s, the bottomland hardwood forest on the area was cleared and drained in an effort to farm the land. The land was deeded to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) following several failed farming attempts.

LDWF has developed four distinct wildlife habitats on the property including a 160-acre moist soil waterfowl refuge, 800 acres in ridge

and swale reforested bottomland hardwoods, over 200 acres in reforested hardwood area and the remaining acreage of planted dove fields and open grasslands.

The terrain is essentially flat with only a five-foot change in elevation across the entire area. Because the soil drains poorly, the land is very susceptible to flooding. There are drainages, wet weather ponds, sloughs, reforested areas, grasslands and supplemental food plots that create habitats favorable to supporting a diversified wildlife community.

On Sep. 4, LDWF held a lottery dove hunt on Bayou Pierre WMA. The opening day hunt was limited to 75 hunters who were selected by random drawing after completing an application. "During the lottery hunt last year, 69 of the 75 hunters selected harvested 488 doves," said Steve Hebert, Region I Wildlife Division Biologist Manager. "The most satisfying part of last year's hunt was that it provided a quality hunting experience. I hope this year's hunt matches or exceeds last year's. The wheat fields are ripening and the sunflowers are flowering. If the weather cooperates, the fields should be in excellent shape come opening day."

After the lottery hunt, dove season will be open the same as outside the WMA. Dove hunting opportunities range from excellent to fair depending on dove migrations and agricultural practices on the surrounding farms.

Dove hunters should scout the area during the later portions of dove seasons when winter cold fronts push more doves into the area and hunting pressure is lighter.

Waterfowl, deer, squirrel and raccoon hunting is available but is limited on Bayou Pierre WMA. A waterfowl refuge is located on the area and is closed to all hunting, trapping and fishing, except for white-tailed deer that can only be hunted by archery on all areas of the WMA.

Bayou Pierre WMA is also a well-known bird watching area from early fall throughout winter and during the northward spring migration. Hawks, owls, as well as white-throated, white-crowned, chipping, field, fox and song sparrows are regular winter residents. The spring brings yellow, Tennessee, black-throated green and magnolia warblers. In the summer, scissor-tailed flycatchers can be seen. The centrally located group of pecan trees is a great location for viewing during late fall and winter, while spring viewing is best along the tree line that follows Bayou Pierre.

The primary access routes are Red River Parish Road 410 and Yearwood Road off of La. Hwy. 1. To get to the area, drive south from Shreveport on La. Hwy. 1, proceed 15 miles from LSU-Shreveport to Yearwood Road. Turn right on Yearwood Road, which becomes Red River Parish Road 410. Travel four miles, turn right on Parish Road 407 and proceed one mile. Then turn right onto Parish Road 412. The viewing site is about half a mile down the road on the left.

Photo by Steve Hebert



OUTDOOR JOURNAL

HUNTING SEASONS AND REGULATIONS SET THROUGH 2007-08 SEASON

THE LOUISIANA WILDLIFE AND Fisheries Commission set the resident game bird and animal hunting seasons and regulations for the 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08 seasons at their July meeting.

The seasons include quail, rabbit, squirrel and deer. The "Louisiana

Hunting Seasons and Wildlife Area Regulations" pamphlet will be available at license vendor outlets in early September.

Visit the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Web site at www.wlf.louisiana.gov to view a copy of the dates today.

LOUISIANA CONSERVATIONIST ACCEPTING RECIPES FOR NEW COOKBOOK

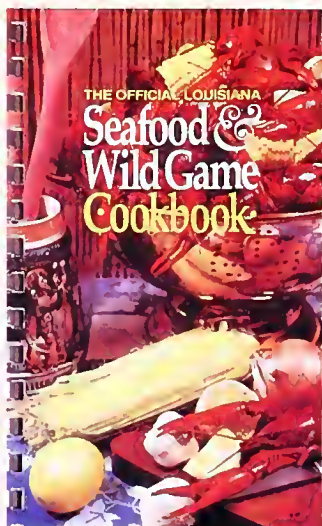
LOUISIANA CONSERVATIONIST is now accepting recipe submissions for a brand new seafood and wild game cookbook due out next year.

The new cookbook will follow the lead of *The Official Louisiana Seafood*

and *Wild Game Cookbook*, produced by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries 20 years ago. That cookbook enjoyed sustained popularity, eventually selling out, but you can help us produce a new, improved version.

Send us your favorite "homemade gourmet" dishes, including traditional and updated versions of wild game and seafood preparations.

Use the submission form in the July/August 2005 issue, pick up a form at the LDWF Headquarters in Baton Rouge, or print a form from our Web site (www.wlf.louisiana.gov). Under "Divisions," click "Public Information," "Louisiana Conservationist," and "Submit a Recipe."



BODCAU WMA SHOOTING RANGE TO GET UPGRADE



THE LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) has recently accepted an offer from the Bossier Parish Police Jury to fund improvements to upgrade the Bodcau Wildlife Management Area's shooting range.

These improvements include an expansion of the rifle range, addition of a shotgun range, and development of a much needed archery range. The estimated cost is in excess of \$10,000, and the start date will be sometime in late summer. The Bossier Parish Police Jury

has announced that it is pleased to help the community provide safe shooting facilities to assist with recreational target shooting and hunter education.

LDWF would like to commend the Bossier Parish Police Jury on its decision to assist with these range improvements. These improvements will be a great service to the Bossier Parish community.

For information on the shooting range, contact John Sturgis at 225/763-5448 or jsturgis@wlf.louisiana.gov.

For a free map of any wildlife management area in the state system, visit our Web site at www.wlf.louisiana.gov or contact the LDWF Librarian at wlf_ldwf@wlf.louisiana.gov or 225/765-2934.

LET MOTHER NATURE NURTURE YOUNG

THE LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) advises anyone who encounters a young deer in the wild to leave it undisturbed.

Every year a natural process occurs as doe deer leave their very young fawns by themselves for extended periods. This "abandonment" is used as a survival mechanism to reduce scent around the fawns and keep them in safer areas until they are strong enough to keep up with the mother. The mother is usually close by feeding and observing all activities.

However, people may not notice the mother and could put themselves and the wildlife in danger by trying to help the "abandoned" animal.

Each year LDWF receives many calls requesting help for these animals. LDWF Biologist Emile LeBlanc says that

people should not interfere with this natural event.

LDWF Enforcement Division Lt. Col. Keith LaCaze said, "The public should be aware that it is illegal to pick up any animal from the wild."

Past studies on rehabilitated fawns that were released back into the wild had a survival rate of almost zero. It must also be understood that in all wildlife populations there is a mortality factor that keeps these populations from expanding beyond the carrying capacity of the habitat in which they live. It is estimated that Louisiana's deer population is around one million animals. Most of Louisiana's deer herd throughout the state is near, at or above its carrying capacity.

For more information contact Emile LeBlanc at 225/765-2344 or eleblanc@wlf.louisiana.gov

Photo by K.A. King/USFWS



AMERICORPS VOLUNTEERS HELP LDWF BLAZE NEW TRAILS



A GROUP OF 10 MEMBERS OF the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), a division of AmeriCorps, completed three weeks of service with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) in June.

The volunteers, who serve 10-month terms on varied projects around the country, spent their time in Louisiana blazing hiking trails, building bird nesting boxes and helping to eradicate invasive plant species on three southeastern wildlife management areas (WMAs).

LDWF biologist Chris Davis praised the team's efforts, saying, "We were told they were hard workers." Not only did they prove that they worked hard, "they were cheerful and energetic and they worked really well with us." The Chainsaw Gang, a

local hiking trail development group consisting mostly of retired persons, and the AmeriCorps group constructed three trails that totaled 9.5 miles on Tunica Hills WMA. The volunteers also constructed signs, benches, a bridge, and an information kiosk at the trailhead.

AmeriCorps member Michael Dunbar, 19, of South Hamilton, Mass. was happy to work with the department. "I love to be outdoors, and this was a great project," he said.

The AmeriCorps NCCC has a mission to strengthen communities and develop leaders through national and community service. Members serve in teams to complete a variety of projects in the areas of education, public safety, disaster relief, environmental conservation and other community needs.

Along the Way . . .

The Quest for Cobia

By Pete Cooper Jr.

I often wonder why I became so obsessed with catching cobia on a fly. Back then I had neither the means nor the knowledge to go about doing it. I had also caught only two on conventional gear. The first—a quite small one—fell for a fried breaded pork chop (bone in), and the second—a fair one—ate a shrimp of barbecuing size. Obviously neither event had yielded any constructive fly-fishing data. But all that aside, somehow I got the hots to fly-fish for the big brown beasts, and that resulted in a quest filled with more frustration, aggravation and humiliation than I have experienced in all other angling activities combined!

As was usually the case back then, I had to learn by trial and error, and for an awfully long time there were plenty of errors! I won't bother you with the gruesome details except to admit that many of them were self-inflicted. Suffice it to say that errors make great teachers, and I persisted—at least I did whenever friends invited me on rather infrequent trips offshore.

Eventually—and I assure you for accomplishments other than catching cobia on flies—the now defunct OMC Fishing Boat Group began providing me with “memo-boats,” the first a 19-foot bay boat. The frequency of my trips offshore then began to increase considerably, as did the number of beasts I either broke off, ran over undetected, or lost the race with a baby to the fly. It's a good thing I wasn't relying on cobia steaks for sustenance!

That summer Bubby put the first legal-sized fish aboard my boat. That day they were thick around both of West Delta's “Inside Pipes,” but all I could do was pluck babies from the midst of the beasts—again.

Admittedly, there were times between defeats when an image would come to mind of the man in the woods who was beating his head against a tree trunk because he was going to feel so good when he

But I was not about to quit, and on a gorgeous early-autumn morning later that year, it all came together.

By then I had refined my knots and had learned a lot about how to whip a big fish with a fly rod before it whipped me. That particular day I also learned that the fly need not be presented some distance from a big cobia to prevent spooking it. That was what allowed the babies to make their deft interceptions. So I banged a couple of the beasts on their noses with it, caught both and returned to the marina to great celebration and rejoicing.

At the time the largest of the two—41.5 pounds—was believed to be the biggest fish of any type ever landed by fly-fishing in Louisiana. That, plus the fact that I had been alone in my bay boat when I caught it, really blew some folks' minds. Some of the most sorely afflicted were members of the Louisiana Outdoor Writers Association who bestowed their prestigious “Fish of the Year Award” upon the big one. That really blew my mind!

The following summer Bubby, Dave, Brent, Brandon and I began to make regular fly-fishing forays after the big brown beasts. Bubby was my most frequent companion, even rebooking charter trips on days when the weather was favorable for cobia fishing out in West Delta. He liked it almost as much as I had grown to, and I guess it was fitting that if my big one was going to be bumped from its top position in the state's fly-fishing records, a fish that he caught while with me would do it. He sure earned that one, too—a bad fish that stayed deep and did nothing to tire itself out on a hot, humid July morning without a breath of a breeze. I took a few quick pictures of them before we headed in—still can't tell which of them looks the worse for wear.

In between trips with Bubby and the Ballays I put a few other fly-fishing folks on cobia, several their first ones. One of them was Howell

Raines, at the time the editor of *The New York Times* and the author of the best-seller *Fly-Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*. He had read some of my stuff, phoned me and asked if I would take him fishing. The first few times we went out together we didn't do very well, but we had fun. When he finally brought along his son Jeff, who was also a competent fly-fisherman, I found a rip that was loaded with cobia. And I was sure glad of that, because the one Jeff caught was the last one he cast at—and there were plenty of others for both of them beforehand! I haven't a clue why cobia rattle fly-fishermen so much, but they sure seem to.

My old buddy Bill froze up solid on each of the first two he hooked and immediately broke off both of them. It took another trip for him to get his first—and he was one proud puppy about it! That's a typical reaction for neophytes, and I must confess that even seasoned veterans can respond the same way. It's especially true when a certain “seasoned veteran” does it again all by himself.

Even before Bubby moved away I had made a lot of solo trips out onto West Delta. I had the drill down fairly well, though I must declare that fly-fishing from the helm of a moving boat is a rather difficult exercise. But over the years I managed to spot a few fish before I ran over them, got off some reasonably accurate casts without fouling my line on the console and eventually caught them—a quite satisfying sequence of events!

The last offshore trip I made with an OMC “memo-boat” was in early October. Again I was alone, and again conditions were absolutely perfect. The fish appeared suddenly along the edge of a lovely rip and moved toward me too quickly for a cast. I let it pass, then sped up in a broad circle which I hoped would lead to a point back down the rip where I could intercept it. And like the events on that memorable autumn day so many years earlier, it all came together. The fish wasn't quite as large as Bubby's, but it was close. It remains my biggest, and after several years now I am still immensely proud of it.

Just think what I'd have missed had I ever quit the quest...

LA Cuisine

THE LOUISIANA KITCHEN

Insalata Caprese

- 2 Lg. fresh mozzarella balls
- 1 Lg. creole tomato
- 4 Fresh basil leaves
- Balsamic vinegar
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Cracked black pepper

Slice tomato and mozzarella into 1/4-inch rounds and layer alternately. Chiffonade basil and spread over tomato and mozzarella. Sprinkle olive oil, vinegar and pepper to taste.

Redfish with Italian Salsa and Pesto

- 2 Fresh Louisiana fish fillets
- 2 Lg. red tomatoes
- 1/2 Md. red onion
- 1 Tbsp. Capers
- 1/3 c. Balsamic vinegar
- 1/2 c. Extra virgin olive oil
- 1 c. Basil leaves
- 1/2 c. Pine nuts
- 2 tsp. Minced garlic
- 1/2 c. Grated Romano cheese
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Rub fillets with olive oil, salt and pepper. Grill to medium. Top with Italian Salsa and Pesto.

For Italian salsa, dice red onion into small pieces. Dice tomatoes into medium pieces. Toss onions and tomatoes with capers, 1/4 cup of olive oil, vinegar, salt and pepper. Chill.

For pesto, grind basil with 1/4 cup of olive oil in a food processor. Add pine nuts, garlic and Romano



Photo by David Humphreys

cheese and grind until the pesto is of an even consistency.

Pasta G.O.P.

- 1 lb. Boiled pasta
- 1/3 c. Extra virgin olive oil
- 1/4 c. Minced flat leaf parsley
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Sweat garlic and parsley in olive oil. Toss with pasta, salt and pepper.

Tiramisu

- 4 Egg yolks
- 1/3 c. Sugar
- 1/4 c. Orange-flavored liqueur
- 1 lb. Mascarpone
- 2 c. Cold, weak coffee
- 21 Lady fingers
- 1 Block semi-sweet chocolate, grated
- Espresso grinds

Beat egg yolks and sugar with a whisk until light gold in color. Add

liqueur and cook over a double boiler until thickened (about 160 degrees Fahrenheit). Let mixture cool to 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

Beat cooled mixture with mascarpone in mixer with a wire whip. Stop beating when it starts to look a little grainy. Grease a loaf pan and line with plastic wrap. Lay a thin layer of the mascarpone mixture in the bottom of the pan.

Briefly dip lady fingers in cold coffee and layer over mixture. Lay a thin layer of mixture over lady fingers. Sift espresso grinds very lightly over the layered fingers and mixture. Do not sift grinds over the third layer.

Cover and let sit overnight. Turn over onto serving tray and coax it out. Garnish with grated chocolate.

Recipes provided by DiGiulio Brothers Italian Cafe in Baton Rouge. Visit them on the Web at www.digiulios.com.

Look for fluttering creatures this fall.

Red-Spotted Purple
Limenitis astyanax



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